

Posted on Sat, Dec. 07, 2002

'Enemy Alien' exhibit offers lesson on excess

By Dennis Rockstroh

Mercury News <http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/>

Before Sept. 11, the date that would live in infamy was Dec. 7.

So a group of authors, scholars and historians have chosen today to open a photo and artifact exhibit at Berkeley Central Public Library that may have some lessons worth pondering.

"The Enemy Alien Files: Hidden Stories of World War II" will run through Dec. 19.

The exhibit tells the story of the fear of the enemy that spread rapidly across the United States after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

By evening, the FBI was rounding up hundreds of Japanese, Italian and German immigrants.

Most people know the story of the roundup of Japanese-Americans, but this display shows what happened to some of the 31,000 non-citizens who were hauled off to jail because of their ethnicity.

The enemies then were Japan, Germany and Italy. Today the enemy is not a nation but shadows around the world.

And over the past year, American citizens, residents and visitors from the Middle East and South Asia have been rounded up and kept incommunicado.

There is something very un-American about that.

Before Pearl Harbor

In the years before Dec. 7, 1941, it was obvious to American leaders that there was a possibility that the United States would be drawn into wars in Asia and Europe.

Government agents watched Japanese, German and Italian immigrants. They drew up lists of people considered dangerous to be jailed or deported in case of war.

In the exhibit, you will come across people like Filippo Molinari, sales representative for an Italian newspaper.

"I was the first one arrested in San Jose," he said. "At 11 p.m. three policemen came to the front door and two at the back. . . . They didn't even give me time to go to my room and put on my shoes. I was wearing slippers. They took me to prison."

In all, more than 30,000 foreigners in the United States and South America were rounded up. Some were deported. Others were held in camps in Pacifica, Angel Island, the Great Plains, the Midwest and Texas.

"It was a terrible injustice," Belmont historian John Christgau said. "People were ripped and torn from their families."

'Kangaroo court'

"The only opportunity they had to declare their loyalty was a five-minute hearing in a camp that was a kangaroo court."

This exhibit raises questions about government action today.

Because the sad fact is that the federal government has a sorry history of leading the nation into trouble and, sometimes, disaster.

Professor David Cole discussed the current legal implications this year in the Stanford Law Review.

"There is undoubtedly a balance to be struck between liberty and security, but there are also several reasons to be cautious about too readily sacrificing liberty in the name of security. First, as a historical matter, we have overreacted in times of crisis.

"In hindsight, these responses are generally viewed as shameful excesses; but, in their day, they were considered reasonable and necessary," he said.

"The post-Sept. 11 response constitutes a reprise of some of the worst mistakes of the past," he concluded. "Once again, we are treating people as suspicious not for their conduct, but based on their racial, ethnic or political identity.

"Once again, we are using the immigration power as a pretext for criminal law enforcement, and we have undertaken a mass detention campaign directed at immigrants without probable cause that any of them are tied to specific threats that we face."

The exhibit is an important lesson on excess. And as one descendant of a jailed immigrant said recently, "If the story isn't told soon, pretty soon nobody will know it happened."

The Berkeley library is at 2090 Kittredge St. For more information, call (415) 921-5007.

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